

Writing in London.

Home and Language in the Work of London Poets of Chinese Descent

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Abstract

This essay discusses literary works produced in London by poets of Chinese descent who are foreign-born or London native. Some of these works are written in English, and some in Chinese. The aim is to discuss poetry that has emphatically or reluctantly embraced the identity narrative, talking of home and belonging in substantially different ways from each other, according to each poet's individual relationship with movement, migration, stability. Therefore, through the use of the phrase 'London poets of Chinese descent', I do not aim at tracing a shared sense of identity, but instead I am interested in using London as a method for an oblique reading that recognizes the variety of angles and approaches in these poets' individual experience, history and circumstances that can range from occasional travel to political exile.

Keywords

language; multicultural London; poets of Chinese descent; xenophone

For more than two decades now, scholarly discourse has been attempting to break the national boundaries of literatures from around the world, and especially of those literatures produced in a hyphenated context, such as the British-Chinese. Many have been advocating a narrative of multiple relations that goes beyond the paradigm of ethnicity and nationality. Edouard Glissant in his seminal book *The Poetics of Relation* (1997) convincingly invites the reader to consider literature in general, and Caribbean literature in particular, as the product of an intricate network of interactions among various cultures. Francoise Lionnet and Shih Shumei (2005) invoke a horizontal, rather than vertical, model for minority cultural formations and their relations with the majority culture. Michelle Yeh (2008) points out that since several modern Chinese poets studied abroad, they developed close contacts with the literatures from other countries, thus conceiving a poetry that was hybrid in its literary references as well as in its language. Jahan Ramazani (2009) ‘argues for a reconceptualization of twentieth and twenty-first-century poetry studies’, ‘Straddling not only the transatlantic divide but also the vast historical and cultural divisions between global North and South, East and West’ (x).

Does this mean that the question of who we are ethnically and nationally does not matter anymore today?

The poet Anna Chen, with the wit that characterizes her performances, once introduced herself ‘I was born in the Far East... of London. In the enchanted land of Hackney. My Dad’s from China, my Mother’s from Dagenham, I’m Dagenese’ (2014). Thus, the poet defines herself, albeit a little absurdly, creating a new national identity of her own choosing. Similarly, the poet Yang Lian stated that he has ‘changed from being a poet of China to a poet writing in Chinese to a poet writing in Yanglish’ (1997: 152-3).

In fact, identity is a fluid concept formed in the crucible of politics, cultural legacy and language; it is about having a sense of belonging, that does not necessarily subscribe the myth of returning home, and, most importantly, it is not entirely defined by the subject, but also by the wider context around her.

This essay discusses literary works produced in London by poets of Chinese descent who are foreign-born or London native. Some of these works are written in English, and some in Chinese.

The aim is to overview, discuss and engage broader theoretical discourses with poetry produced in the cultural capital of London, which has emphatically or

reluctantly embraced the identity narrative, often breaking many of the boundaries of Chinese national and ethnic affiliation. Naturally, these poems talk of home and belonging in substantially different ways from each other, according to each poet's individual relationship with movement, migration, stability. Therefore, through the use of the phrase 'London poets of Chinese descent', I do not aim at tracing a shared sense of identity, but instead I am interested in using London as a method for an oblique reading that recognizes the variety of angles and approaches in these poets' individual experience, history and circumstances that can range from tourism to political exile. Recuperating a discredited framework, I adopt multiculturalism not as the impermeable co-occurrence of discrete essentialist givens, with their own languages and clear-cut boundaries that separate one culture, and one language, from another. Rather, I understand it as a dynamic and performative social context, a polyculturalism that is porous, interstitial, pervious, and therefore begs for being "read together" (Laachir 2015). London multiculturalism is then the context where these poets write and perform their identities, participating across cultures and cognitive experiences through the linguistic-discursive resources (language) available to them.

Guiding questions in my investigation include: How does these poets' experience with London translate into literary production? Is there any reciprocal accommodation between their writings and the place where they have been produced? What are the contextual circumstances, linguistic behaviour and literary mediations in the works of these London poets of Chinese descent?

In answering these questions, I have to recognize that much of the interpretation of what these poets say in their works depends on the conceptual and theoretical framework employed. Is there a theoretical framework that is able to shed light on and accommodate such a varied corpus of works?

Existing studies by anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, literary critics and linguists have put under stringent examination processes and products of plurilingual, globalized, transnational cultures and literatures. Overtaking cosmopolitanism, transnational and translocal studies have for years now crucially offered theoretical and analytical propositions that can accommodate today's mutated circumstances of writers with extended mobility, both physical and virtual, while necessarily shifting emphasis from the nation-state to a dynamic interaction among multiple regional and ethnic encounters.

On the particular issue of hyphenated literature, quite a wide range of studies and anthologies is available on Chinese American literature, so much so, that at the end of the 1990s, Shengmei Ma individuates a 'current academic fixation' on literatures in English from the so-called 'third world' and from minorities within the so-called 'first world'. At the same time, however, he laments that literature written in Chinese by Chinese immigrants in the USA, is studied by a mere handful of sinologists, despite 'the immense Chinese readership at home and abroad', and concludes that language, rather than historical colonization, is the key to a text's inclusion or exclusion in postcolonial discourse (Ma 1998: 103-104).

Conversely, according to my findings, very little interest is demonstrated in the works written in both Chinese and in English in the UK, and even less has been produced on poets of Chinese descent in London.¹ This absence is perplexing, not just because it is in opposition to what we read is the situation in the United States of America, but because it may point to the danger that the uniqueness of these writers' contribution to English and Chinese letters will be at best under-appreciated, at worst, lost. For example, it is disappointing to notice that in the book bearing the promising title *Voices of the Crossing. The Impact of Britain on Writers from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa*, published in 2000, no writer of Chinese descent is mentioned. Moreover, among the generally not-much known London poets of Chinese descent who write in English, the works of the authors I am investigating are only partially and anyway very rarely included in any UK major Chinese departments' libraries.

Since the late eighteenth century, when the first Chinese immigrants reached London as sailors on board of the ships of the East India Company, the demographic and occupational composition of the Chinese community in London has considerably changed. In 1877 the first group of Chinese students, including the renowned scholar and translator Yan Fu, was sent by the Qing emperor to study in the UK, at the Royal Naval College, in Greenwich. That was a starting point for the numerous cultural exchanges that still continue today, with the year 2015 as the Year of Cultural Exchange between China and the UK. In the second decade of the 20th century, many an intellectual from China travelled all over Europe, Japan and America. Some of these chose London as their destination, deciding to sojourn here while pursuing their writing careers.² The political shift at the establishment of the People's Republic of China, in 1949, had an impact on Chinese immigration to London. Many Cantonese refugees arrived to London via Hong Kong, settling down initially in East London,

Limehouse area, and subsequently in central London, around Gerard Street, the current Chinatown, mainly providing for the catering industry, but also feeding into trade and general culture, from Chinese medicine to tea. In the 1980s, with the opening up of the economic reforms, more and more students and intellectuals from the PRC have been coming to London for study and teaching purposes. London Chinese population has been steadily growing since, including artists, writers, and young students, many of which use the Internet as their publishing platforms, and to form online communities. In such a context, in addition to technology and Internet publishing, the heightened mobility of today's living clearly complicates the definition of literary positioning.

From its inception, diaspora studies have been questioning the national frames of literatures and languages, but they have also consistently adopted a narrative of migration as loss, longing, exile that puts at its core the pathos of separation from the homeland, focuses on the spatial and temporal dislocation of the subject, and highlights the antinomy of 'mother culture' and 'new culture'. Such a conventional stance in diaspora studies appears to be often entangled with another conceptual frame: that one of imagined communities, and of an ultrastable cultural identity.

By continuously repackaging the theme of China's ultrastable cultural identity, Chinese culturalist discourse risks reducing individual authors to mere representatives of an obsolete imagined community. At the end of the 1980s, US-based scholar Sun Longji, for example, had no reservations, when he stated: 'A Chinese is programmed by his culture to be 'Chinese'. In other words, in-bred cultural predispositions make the Chinese what they are ...' (Barmé and Minford, eds. 1988: 136). Controversial Hong Kong-based historian Jin Guantao similarly affirmed: 'China's only mode of existence is to revive the past' (133). Huntington characterized the difference between western and non-western civilization as the unilinear progress of Enlightenment values vs. 'a cyclical dynamic' of cultural consciousness (Ong 1999:189). And, in Frank Chin's model, the differences between western and Asian cultures were given as 'real', 'sharply defined', and 'easily stated'. Works and authors were divided into poles of opposition, such as Chinese vs. American, East vs. West, and real vs. fake (Chin et al. 1991). This East/West dichotomy also had the potential to symbolically carve up texts according to fixed notions of race, gender, citizenship, and national (be)longing, while often investing the native speaker of a transcendent status, as the repository of illusory linguistic origin and unity.

Historian Wang Gungwu (2013: 132-133) points out how this dominant imagery of a single Chinese diaspora serves political strategies of identity that continuously draw back to the nation-centre. And Jin Tsu (2011: 2-4) cleverly notes that such a 'tolerated essentialism' - that uses the notion of the mother tongue to support expressions of cultural belonging, with the native speaker at its centre - 'has been treated as no more than a mundane fact'. In fact, 'The emotional investment in the Chinese language, for those who have known it all their lives, is synonymous with being Chinese'.

It is in order to avoid such 'tolerated essentialism' of the mother tongue that the concept of languaging can come useful. Language, as a verb, implies that language itself has agency in meaning-making (Swain 2006: 96).³ In her 2014 book *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience*, cultural critic Rey Chow also opposes centralizing views on languaging and cultural identity. Commenting upon colonial education, and the state of bilinguality or interlinguality it imposes on the colonized subject, Chow recognizes a 'confrontation' between the two languages, a perpetual conflict, where 'there can be no pure linguistic practice' (Chow 2014:37). Forging the concept of 'xenophone', she further details a creative usage of language by the colonized subject 'that draws its sustenance from mimicry and adaptation and bears in its accents the murmur, the passage, of diverse found speeches' (59). Thus, languaging and xenophone are two linguistic phenomena that can be explored together.

London poets of Chinese descent may be experiencing a similar state of linguistic estrangement: no matter if they write in Chinese or English, their discordant usage of language displays a resounding 'xenophony'.

Yang Lian (杨炼) was born in Bern, Switzerland, in 1955, to Chinese diplomats, but grew up in mainland China. Starting his writing career in the late 1970s, while still living in China, Yang Lian migrated to New Zealand at the end of the 1980s, invited from the University of Auckland, to lecture on contemporary Chinese literature. During his sojourn in Auckland, he expressed public support to the Tiananmen protest movement that was to become infamous as the Tiananmen massacre of June the 4th. For this political reason, Yang Lian was deprived of his Chinese citizenship, and suffered a period of exile. After three years in Auckland, he led a 'floating' life, traveling from one place to another, eventually settling down in

London. After many years living in London in a status of semi-dissidence, in 2013, Yang Lian was awarded a residency grant that took him to Berlin, where he has been living since.

Yang Lian has been writing poetry in Chinese, and even though he is now well versed in English, he refuses to write in English. He has always expressed strong interest in the Chinese language, recognizing in it the vessel for those ‘intrinsic elements’ of cultural identity, and yet he has developed a complex and ambiguous attitude towards it, being deeply aware of the elusiveness of his imagined unity and security in the mother tongue. Thus, if in the mid-1980s, Yang Lian was able to state ‘We are rooted in a common culture, in the unique linguistic form of a psychological structure’ (1984:69), he later changed his position, as can be apparent from this line of the poem ‘Winter Garden’: ‘in the world the one who trusts writing least is the poet’ (1998:338).

Chinese reading public expresses different views on these texts: on the basis of the fact that these texts are originally written in Chinese and that they seem to address an exclusively Chinese audience at home and abroad, some readers regard them as proper Chinese poetic works; others consider them as works by the Chinese Diaspora in the Chinese mother tongue, others still, like in the case of fellow poet Zang Di, as works written in some sort of ‘foreign Chinese’. This ambivalence about the ‘same’ words is not peculiar of the reader only. Sometimes authors simply and publicly acknowledge such ambivalence. For example, as already reported in the beginning of this essay, Yang Lian describes himself as a poet writing in Yanglish, ‘a designation which reveals that my poems are foreign even to Chinese speakers; they cannot be ‘translated’ into common, everyday Chinese’ (1997:153).

No doubt, Yang’s life experience in London has affected the way he relates to his identity and cultural heritage. In the *sanwen*⁴ piece introducing his collection *Lee Valley Poems* (2009: 9), he muses:

Give me a single breath, and I will grow roots, penetrate the soil, probe shingle and magma,
and hear the sea through every navigator since the dawn of time.

And even more clearly:

I suddenly realised that my relationship with London had changed. It no longer rubbed

shoulders as it passed me by, but it had come to a halt, to turn into the first ‘local’ I had since I left China. Even stranger than simple peripatetic exile, this superficial standstill doubly demonstrated life cannot help but move. Was it through writing this collection *Lee Valley Poems* in London that these external places are converted into my inner self, to become part of the ‘I’ of the text? [...] Tang poetry, China, foreign countries, London, the Lee Valley, my tiny study, the specific moment of writing a word, the non-time implied by the tenselessness characteristic of the Chinese verb, these are all in the ‘I’. (*Ibid.*: 9, 11)

The gathering together of a range of experiential elements, places, memories and cultural references are consciously and unconsciously processed in Yang Lian’s work, ending up estranging what once was familiar to the poet:

a piece of chinaware glued together to look new
the surprise of words grows older more intense. (*Ibid.*: 33)

Issues of cultural identity and tradition prominently intersect with language throughout this poet’s work, where the poetic *I* is able to efface the diachronic nature of language (*Ibid.*:9), by means of a variety of aesthetic devices, from complex artificial structures to syntactic indeterminacy, to neologisms and characters’ dissection, to homophony and far-reaching intertextuality. Yang Lian’s poetry thus becomes highly personal, discordant, calling for linguistic impropriety in standard parlance, challenging the habits of both the Chinese and English reader in translation. In the Introduction to his latest endeavour, *Narrative Poem*, a book permeated with autobiographical elements, Yang Lian insists:

Our language is split between characters derived from the aesthetics of archaic Chinese and words derived from non-Chinese concepts; our thinking is torn apart by synaptic connections derived from harsh dislocation of east and west; our ideas are too often reduced to a mass of inexplicable feelings and empty rhetoric of no discernable meaning. (Yang 2010: 6)

And the last poem of the section ‘Narrative Poem’ (2010:105) concludes:

there’s not a street corner street name bus stop
that doesn’t inform on us like language

Street corner, *street name* and *bus stop*, are tropes of place, in synecdoche they stand for the places in the life of the persona; like the persona's language(s), places give a clue of what the persona is. In the intersection between the poet and the places he lives in, Yang Lian fosters his openness to the 'world', through a complex, difficult xenophony.

In a discussion of home and languaging in the works of London poets of Chinese descent, a methodology that seeks to recognize multiple beginnings, rather than the nostalgia of one point of origin, appears to be more fruitful, albeit in contrast with the conventional stance in diaspora criticism. While cultural theorists such as Gilroy (1993) and Clifford (1994) have for three decades now pointed out that home may not always be what we leave behind, concepts of 'Relation' and 'creolisation', as defined by Edouard Glissant *The Poetics of Relation* (1997), and especially in his later collection of essays *La cohée du Lamentin* (2005), provide an even more focused theorization of the creative processes of relational identities and linguistic behaviors. Relation will not denote dilution or lack of definition, instead, breaking down a too rigidly conceived (ideologized and racialized) identity, it will exchange it for a more fluid composite world that has not one point of origin, but springs from an at least double, often multiple, beginning (Glissant 2005: 50, 136, 180).

Work by **Hannah Lowe** and Meiling Jin add more nuances to the depictions of a creolized, relational concept of home as a space that simultaneously incorporates the *here* and the *there*. Born in 1976 in Britain to an Afro-Jamaican Chinese father and a white English mother, Hannah Lowe published her semi-autobiographical collection *Chick* in 2013, narrating her cultural inheritance through two main tropes: that one of her father's gambling habit, seen as a familial tradition transmitted to him from the Shanghainese grandfather, and that one of food as a cultural signifier. As the following stanzas excerpted from the poem 'The Three Treasures' (46) illustrate:

[...]

England downstairs in a rocking chair.
Nanna rocking with her playing cards,
cigs and toffee, tepid tea

Jamaican fried chicken in the kitchen,
pig-snout in the stewpot,
breakfast pan of salt-fish, akee

China in the won-ton skin,
gold songbird on the brittle porcelain,
pink pagoda silk settee

Jamaica in the statues, *lignum vitae* heads
of dreadlocks. Anansi, rebel spider
in the storybooks, the poetry

England eating peaches on the patio,
hopscotching, Mum in wellies, secateurs
around the rosebush and the raspberries

[...]
England for the English in graffiti
on the roundabouts and bus shelters,
Please Sir! On TV

Jamaica on the phone at 3 a.m.,
my father's back-home voice through fuzz
and crack: *My friend, long time no see*

China in the Cantonese he knew
but wouldn't speak, in letters stuffed
in shoe-boxes, ink-stick calligraphy

China in his slender bones,
in coral birds of stitched bamboo,
China in an origami butterfly, that flew⁵

Pidgin English, heteroglossia, and multiple cultural backgrounds, within the London context, are the telling features of this relational poetics. Stanza by stanza, the poet condensates the multiple linguistic, ethnic and cultural dimensions into the space of a single building - her home. The patois of Jamaican, Cantonese, and English is used to set the persona's familial space, with food and objects named in different languages, composing a multi-story building of cultural affiliations. The transcription of a familial, non-standard diction is able to convey the language of intimacy. It is in such discordant use of language that words become carriers of personal histories, reflecting

the intertwining of stories, memories, and voices of mixed provenance. Pidgin English is only one but widely recognized discordant languaging. It has been praised as a writing practice that can enhance expressivity by authors as different as George Bernard Shaw and Otto Jespersen, and, in the particular variety of Chinglish, it was eloquently advocated by the literary polymath Lin Yutang in the 1930s, and as we will see it has been also used in London authors of Chinese descent, such as Hannah Lowe, Meiling Jin, Jennifer Wong, and Xiaolu Guo.

Meiling Jin can be considered the first London Caribbean Chinese poet. Born in Guyana in 1956 to Chinese parents, Jin migrated with her family to England in 1964. She started her writing career in the mid-1980s with the publication of *Gifts from My Grandmother*, a collection of poetry in four sections exploring the themes of womanhood, sexuality and racial discrimination as a Chinese in the hostile contexts of both Guyana and London. Thus, discomfort and dispossession are emotions that transcend place, implying that for the Caribbean-Chinese-British postcolonial subject the experience of racial discrimination is aggravated by the hostility experienced at 'home' as abroad. In the poem 'Strangers in a hostile landscape' (1986: 18-19) we read of the persona's history, from her origins and her ethnic identity as a Guyanese, to her arrival in Britain:

My grand-father sailed on the ship
Red-riding Hood:
part of a straggly band
of yellow humanity.
They severed the string
that tied them to the dragon,
and we grew up never knowing
we belonged
to a quarter of the world's people.

[...]
my parents packed their bags.
[...]
to the imperial palace itself.

We were a straggly bunch of immigrants
in a lily white landscape.
We made our home among strangers,

knowing no one but ourselves.

In Jin's work, language is evidently demotic, discarding high diction, using often transgressing orthographical rules in the use of lower-case letters for the personal pronoun *I*, or for nationality names, such as Chinese and British. On the use of English and on the source of inspiration for her poetry writing, Jin states that she has found English 'to be a straight jacket', with 'white' imagery and form. She has been facing the problem of how to write in a native language that she does not recognize as her own, searching for a voice among women's and world literature, and eventually being inspired by:

[...] Women Warrior, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Kitty Tsui and Alice Walker. And then I began to write. [...] And even after this, there lurks the white ghost of Wordsworth somewhere. (These things take time). But I have called a truce now with the Gwei lo⁶ and with the English language. They must stay in the mausoleum of obscure objects. And we must continue to write and to fight to get our work published. (Jin 1986: 10-11)

'Gwei lo', the 'white demon', is more often translated as 'foreign ghost'. It is a Cantonese term, with a long history of derogatory usage in the context of western imperialism in China. In this short collection, it appears at least three times (11, 35, 7), in relation to British colonialism, being it literary, cultural, or linguistic, as it is apparent in 'Soul loss' (71):

When I was a child
a demon came
and stole my soul
all he left was an empty shell

i wondered around
lost
looking for the demon
looking for my soul

i fought emptiness
despair
anguish
i took to aping the demon.

Until, i found a naked flame

[...]

and met the demon

[...]

i teetered on the brink

of despair,

and ate him.

Interestingly, some elements of Jin's poetry also appear in Lowe's work, but in a somewhat diametrical way. For example, while in Lowe gambling and food almost become a means of self-definition, and an important conduit for the transmission of culture, in Jin these are primarily vehicles of imposed lingering stereotypes, and racial discrimination, especially when occurring as clichéd phrases such as: 'soy sauce', 'rice', 'Chinese Take-away', 'spare ribs' (26):

I will take away

a chinese,

lock him up

in a pentonville

for serving food with lice in.

This will cure

his presumptuousness

and maybe even

his gambling.

Fried lice,

spare ribs,

crazy yellow bastard.

Why can't you be civilized

Just like us (er) british.

[...]

In many writings, at home and in migration, food works as a linguistic and cultural signifier. As suggested by John Thieme's study on cookbooks, 'food discourses are both an integral part of the ways in which individuals and cultures identify themselves

and of the ways in which they are perceived from outside, usually as the result of stereotyping' (Thieme and Raja 2007: xix). Perhaps, as Rey Chow (2014:79-101) points out in relation to the use of food and consumption in the postcolonial context of Hong Kong, and in particular in the work of Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan, food is 'another form of orality' that compensates for, or supplements the voice of the postcolonial writer. It is indeed thought provoking to note that, among these London poets of Chinese descent, the women poets all have in some degree mused about food. In their work, food is often presented as an event that narrates the confluence of cultures and therefore requiring heteroglossia and even Chinglish, such as in the following two stanzas, taken respectively from Meiling Jin's 'Baked beans and rice' (1986: 11) and from Jennifer Wong's 'Reivention' (2006: 22):

Dear mother,
did you realize
how cham chong ★
baked beans and rice was?
I am sure we children
didn't either.

★ *mixed up: cooking term for two things fried up together*

Making do with Chinese cabbage bought from Marks and Sparks
Economy Shitake mushrooms from Sainsbury's
Boiling an assortment of frozen meats
In an old-fashioned National rice cooker

Food, that is, may take the function of marking identity, being it imposed on, or embraced by, the subject. Since we are in the presence of a multicultural context, the occurrence of food in these poems often requires some use of translanguaging, whether analysed as heteroglossia, pidgin, translation, or transliteration of an evocative Chinese. Taking a role of cultural translator, Jin employs heteroglossia, transliterating a Chinese phrase that is felt by the same poet to require a footnote. Jennifer Wong, instead, uses Chinglish to encapsulate in one word the double linguistic and cultural context.

Many contemporary writers, such as Dogfoot Chan, Yang Lian, Hongbin Liu, Sean Wai Keung, Jennifer Wong, Xiaolu Guo, are able to interchangeably live in the cultural capitals of Beijing, London, Berlin, New York, Hong Kong or Paris. Their work presents us with bodies, families, communities and nations connoted by the fluidity and diversity of contemporary life, thus complicating the unilateral relationship between belonging and location. In many cases, the ‘home’ left behind does not trigger nostalgia, but is instead perceived as a confining space that wither inspiration. Like Carlos Rojas has wittingly elaborated in his book *Homesickness* (2015), there are instances in modern Chinese literature, where home itself becomes a space of illness, and consequentially homesickness comes to be understood as a condition not caused by a *longing* for home, but rather by an excessive *proximity* to it (vii).

In **Jennifer Wong**’s two poetry collections, *Gold Fish* and *Summer Cicadas*, for example, home is at times portrayed as ‘smothering’, a place that ‘the more you think of it the less/ there is to miss’ (2013:39), ‘a pitch-black well’ where ‘a life’ ‘might drown’ (2006:45). At other times, the poet plays with the exchange of places and moving subjects, of perspectives and images, as in the poem ‘Summer Cicadas’ (32-33), where the persona is caught in an unresolved in-between dimension; or in ‘Homelands’, where the persona is in an airplane, preparing to land in London - the homeland of someone else, who is in turn living in Hong Kong – that is the persona’s homeland (11). Born and raised in Hong Kong, Jennifer Wong arrived to the UK to study at Cambridge University and has successively settled down in Greater London. Ethnic stereotyping and exoticism intertwine in her poetry, but it is as if Wong is looking at her own culture, her home, from an interchangeable point of view, as a foreigner and as a local, or perhaps from the point of view of someone caught in between the two cultural spheres. In an explicit act of reflexivity, Wong is at moments able to look at her multiple cultural positioning in estrangement, keeping questions of shared identities unanswered.

Born and raised in Hackney to a Jamaica-born Chinese father and an English mother, **Anna Chen** defines herself as a Chinese British artist (Chen 2014). She is a charismatic performing poet from the punk generation, playwright, blogger, essay-writer, and BBC broadcaster, daughter of the wartime seafarers’ leader Sam Chen, principal activist in the Save China campaign during the Japanese occupation of China (1937-1945). Chen’s poetry has been performed in several venues, including

the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, the Oxford University Poetry Society, the Stoke Newington Library, etc. Being politically active in a number of social campaigns (from the smear of the ‘Foot and Mouth’ disease to the anti-war protest in 2001), and founder member of the Chinese Civil Rights Action Group UK (CCRAG), which was later called with the Chinese for ‘civil rights’ (Min Quan), Chen has been writing poems on political issues, trying to subvert, among other things, stereotypes on Chinese immigrants in the UK. Like for other poets of Chinese descent, for Chen too, growing up in the UK meant a sudden realization of themselves as ‘others’:

As I grew older, I realised that some people responded to my appearance as if I was an exotic outsider, even though I felt fully English – I might as well have been half mermaid and half unicorn. (2007:16)

Her pungent political irony may span from gender to race issues, drawing attention to the lingering orientalism in the British context that keeps on excluding and marginalising them. The performance of ‘Suzy Wrong – Human Cannon’ at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, in 1994, brought her visibility and immediate attention, as ping pong balls were fired in high velocity at the audience through the lower fissure of an inflatable sex-doll.

‘Anna May Wong Must Die!’, from Chen’s first collection *Reaching for My Gnu* (2012: 52), revolves around the figure of the first Chinese American actress Anna May Wong (1905-1961), a symbol of modern Chinese woman, who appeared as heroine in many Hollywood movies, featuring stereotypical Chinese characters, such as the enigmatic oriental, docile woman, or the calculating Dragon Lady. The poem opens with:

Down in the alleys of old Chinatown,
In the gawdy bawdy backstreets of sinister renown,
Dope pedlars peddle, the dragon gets chased,
It’s the same old story, the same yellow face,
The Man with the Fu Manchu opium embrace
Could kill you in an instant and never leave a trace.
He knows all the tricks how to get you high
And that’s why Anna May Wong must die.

As cultural and spatial boundaries are reconfigured in the contested space of London, concepts of home and migration can often be theorized in terms of spatialized relations of power. Jin's and Chen's poetry can be taken as examples, but also younger poets seem to contribute to the same postcolonial approach. For example, born and raised in post British-occupation Singapore, **Stephanie Dogfoot Chan** has populated the London scene from 2009 to 2013. In 2012 she won the UK Farrago Slam Championships, performing 'Hippy Tiger Mother' and '29 Bus'. In the same year, she represented the UK in the European Slam Championships in Antwerp, coming third-place. In 2013, again she represented the UK in the Poetry Slam World Cup in Paris, being shortlisted for the semi finals. She participated at the Edinburgh Free Fringe in 2013, performing her slam poem 'Foreign Go Home! (With Me)', also sometimes entitled 'That Foreigner Poem'. She was very active in poetry fringe festivals and slam poetry events all over London, performing in venues such as: Poetry Olympics: Word Games; Hackney Hammer and Tongue Slam; Slutwalk London; Harringay Migrant Centre; Queer Zine Fest London; Balham Free Fringe Festival; SOAS Carnival of Resistance; Southbank Centre; and many more theatres, pubs and squats. Her poetry almost exclusively deals with political and social issues. On her website, we read the following self-description:

Long Story Short: Awkward twentysomething from the Far East moves to London for the first time to find her place in history and the world, while dodging riot cops, spies, bailiffs, orientlists and haters. She will try to make sense of the bizzarrenness of living in the (so-called) Centre of the World in the 21st century through poems and stories. Hilarity ensues.

Long Story Long: In 2009 Stephanie Chan got off a plane at Heathrow, joining millions of colonial subjects throughout history who felt the need to live in the same town as their Queen. Join her in the strangest years of her life as she gallivants around London, attempting to take its men, eat its women and steal its jobs. She explores what it means to be foreign, what it means to be home, and why the hell everyone from everywhere feels the need to go away to find themselves.

This kind of narrative shows how travel can merge with a history of colonial discourse. Constructing the English/Chinese distinction as natives and foreigners, it addresses issues of cultural inequity, engages with identity and political themes, and uses a de-mystifying tone to question English authority. Chan displays confidence in

her own ground, place and speech in London, and the fact that she has represented the UK in European fringe festivals endorses all this. Like for Meiling Jin, also for Chan her own cultural context is by definition hybrid. In an interview with 2009 UK National Poetry Slam Champion, Pete the Temp, Chan talks of how she grew up reading bestsellers by London children writer Enid Mary Blyton (1897-1968), and how she took her nickname Dogfoot from the protagonist in the children story *Daggie Dogfoot*, by English writer Dick King-Smith (1922-2011).

By affirming ‘the need to go away to find themselves’, the psychological space of elsewhere is for Chan London, the UK. And yet, London, with its colonial history of power, is also the home that the postcolonial subject claims as her own. In ‘The 29 Poem’, the 29 bus is given as setting and as trope of London’s multicultural population. This is a bus that traverses London, from North, in Wood Green, to the centre, in Trafalgar square, and it is rode by ‘the grumpy Turkish man’, or ‘the Spanish Mohawk queen’, because

it is a little known rule on the 29 that there has to be a member of every continent represented on the bus at all times or it *will* explode.

[...]

And 100 years from now, long after London has crumbled to the ground, the buildings have corroded away and the lions on Trafalgar square have finally upped and left for warmer climates, the 29 will still be running.

A similar relationship between the persona and the city of London is described in the poem ‘LDN (you’ll know what I mean)’. Here the poet recognizes London as the colonizers’ city, the western cultural capital where ‘a high chair and a throne for millennia of men to pay to sit upon and believe they ruled the world’. Places become personified, or maybe people have become places: ‘Hey Haringay, I’m sorry I stole your new lighter./ Hey Brixton, I’m sorry I missed you last Sunday night [...]’. The persona – a postcolonial subject - is susceptible to the lure of the city, and wants to be recognized as forming part of it: ‘Take a picture to preserve me’, ‘I want to be remembered on these streets’, full of ‘faded footprints of minor gods from the past 600 years.’, ‘Tell me how we’ve been making history since the day we got here’. And yet, towards the end of the poem, the relationship between the subject and the alluring ‘centre’ is somewhat inverted:

But London it was never about you. You were never a destination, just a vehicle to greater things.

[...]

You are everybody's Somewhere Else.

[...]

You're just the dude who let the world tattoo themselves all over his body.

And I am the bad idea gap year Chinese calligraphy on your lower back that you thought meant 'peace' but really says 'otters'.

But you can't quite bring yourself to get rid of me.

You know that right?

[...]

Amid misinterpretations and bad translations, the cultural interactions entertained by the postcolonial subject with the colonizer, although remaining superficial and exploitative, still lives mark on the body, making it hybrid, making it listen, as put in 'That Foreigner Poem':

Keep your deep knowledge of my country.

I don't even care if you've never heard of it before,

[...]

Just drop your assumptions, read my lips

And listen when we speak

The complication of the cultural interaction, in the thus creolized, multiply intersected subject, resides in enjoying being changed: 'I like the way I tweak my accent', 'choose my clothes and cut my hair'. But this constitutes her predicament to become the other wherever she goes, since now, being at home does not guarantee a shared identity: 'when I go back home/as people stop and stare, muttering,/ *just another middle-class asshole,/corrupted by the West*'. And even more poignantly, not only West and East become irreconcilable, but even the inscription of Mainland China as the Other is reason for discrimination:

But these days I'm more likely to get flak

Back home for how I speak Chinese,

See, my Mandarin's tainted by a Beijing drawl

[...]

every generation there's a new culture

to discover, to blame, to hate.

[...]

(but who is 'them' and who is 'we'?)

And on and on and on it goes,

This constant litany, of

Foreigner go home, foreigner go home, foreigner go home

Among London poets of Chinese descent, **Con Le** (黎均全) is the oldest and perhaps also most peculiar in his approach to xenophone languaging. Born in Vietnam in 1917, Con Le's family was originally from Gaoqiao, a small village near the town of Jiujiang, in Guangdong province. At the age of 11, with the premature death of his mother, Con Le, together with his elder brother and his father, travelled back to Gaoqiao, in order to settle down in the home village and receive education. But those were turbulent times and the three Les had to head back to Vietnam, where Con Le and his brother attended a private school run by an ex Chinese literati who had passed the imperial examinations, and was renowned for his preparation in classical Chinese literature. All Con Le learned in those years constituted the basis for his life-long achievements in poetry writing. Up until November 1979, Con Le and his wife travelled back and forth between Mainland China, Vietnam and Hong Kong, failing various attempts at leaving the East as refugees. They were finally able to reach the UK and settle down in London, establishing a literary network with numerous writers of Chinese descent in North America, Canada, Thailand, Australia, France, Malaysia, etc. The first volume of his collection of poems *Swallow House* was published thanks to the After Dementia Millennium Award. The second volume of the *Swallow House* collection was also realized thanks to a £5,000 cheque, awarded to Con Le through the East London Chinese Community Centre. One main aim of this last award was to promote understanding of Chinese culture among younger generations of British Chinese in London. Thus Con Le, while selecting poems with a specific London theme for the anthology, also took the task of teaching weekly classes on imagery and styles of classical Chinese poetry and the art of Chinese calligraphy at the community centre.

A worldwide recognized calligrapher, Con Le writes poetry that can be seen as the epitome of literary dislocation. Written in classical Chinese style, using classical poetic imagery and tropes, re-proposing the classical genre of the occasional poetry, it

quirkily combines London themes, such as a dragon boat festival on the river Thames; the birthday of Her Majesty the Queen; the mourning of his late wife. Now, in the context of the diaspora studies, Con Le's life-long achievement in classical Chinese poetry, although combining with themes that are so obviously London-related, would be read as evidence of his bonding with the homeland. In contrast, I read it as an artistic practice that synchronizes a literary world with the new context of production, an example of writing in London, an isomorphic, multiple experience, and not at all as a nostalgic reminiscence of a lost past. The Chinese language used in Con Le's poems presents the complication not just of having classical syntactic features, but also of being an old language, learned in the years of his youth, practiced only in creation. It is only thanks to the efforts of Cecilia Tsang, mentor and translator of Con Le's poems, that the English monolingual public can today read Le's work. But, although Tsang's translations aim at conveying the general meaning, with a definitely domesticating strategy and a rather liberal attitude towards structure and rhyme pattern of the source text, they can be appreciated for exactly their supposed weak points: they further dislocate the Chinese originals, both temporally and geographically. In Con Le too, as in Meiling Jin and Hannah Lowe, we are in front of a triple referential framework that is in his case further amplified in translation.

Con Le's linguistic, stylistic, and referential approximation to classical Chinese, together with his development of London themes, makes up a fusion worth exploring in its own right. Poems such as 'In joyful celebration of the Queen's birthday' (2004:80) are composed in the classical Chinese poetic form of the *lǚshī* that employs a conventional regulated tonal patterns and rhyme scheme in five syllable-lines. Language is rather formulaic and the terms used are commonly seen in Chinese occasional poems. Accordingly, the first six lines of 'In joyful celebration of the Queen's birthday' describe the event of the birthday celebration in the West and in general in the external world. Terms include: the Golden Star (長庚, Venus), the bright star seen in the western sky, Phoenix City (鳳城, the imperial palace), sunflowers (葵, flowers that bending towards the sun are symbol of admiration and respect), and toasting to a high-ranked person (稱觴). In the first six lines there also are two literary allusions, the first one (嵩呼) refers to Chapter 63 of the mid-18th

century Chinese classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*, also describing a banquet for a birthday celebration. The second one (擊壤) refers to an ancient folk song, entitled ‘Ground-thumping song’ (擊壤歌). These allusions may be interpreted as expressing the poet’s contempt for, or belittlement of, the ruler, but it is my opinion that they are here simply employed for achieving higher literary effect. In the last two lines of the poem, the focus moves from the outside world to the inside world of the poet himself. This shift in focus is also a conventional essential structure of Chinese traditional occasional poetry. Thus, with the exception of the mentioning of the Queen of England in the title, this poem could well be a poem dedicated to the joy of any pre-modern Chinese emperor’s birthday. I argue however that the fact that the poet decides to develop specific London themes testifies to a process of coming into relation with the British capital. This should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

Few glosses stand out in my examination of this body of work.

Among the poets discussed in this essay, there is no clear sense of a shared identity. They arrived in the UK in different historical moments and from various geographical regions: the poets who reached London at a later stage of their writing career and those who have been living here for most of their life might not have actual common background, and their claimed Chinese identity may in fact be something considerably different from one another.

In Tu Weiming’s influential proposition (1994), the ‘changing meaning of being Chinese’ entails a new ‘cultural space’ that ‘transcends the ethnic, territorial, linguistic, and religious boundaries that normally define Chineseness’ (v). In such a concept of ‘cultural China’, however, Tu recognizes ‘three symbolic universes. The first consists of Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore – that is societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese’. ‘The second consists of Chinese communities throughout the world’ and the third symbolic universe consists of all those who do not have any direct connection to Chineseness but who ‘try to understand China intellectually’ (13). Brenda Chan (2006), in her

study of Chinese national identity among the virtual communities, identifies four different Chinese nations: the official Chinese nation, which comprises all PRC citizens; the PRC's Han nation; the PRC and the 'compatriots' of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau; Chinese who live in other parts of the world (7). Against these propositions, I argue, many more Chinas and respective Chinese identities can be found in the specificity of every intersection between the subject and each of her geographical contexts.

The only concrete common denominator among these poets is that they all have experienced living and writing in London. Methodologically this implies the adoption of the multiculturalism framework, which has allowed me to ground these poetic works locally, in London, as an actual scene of writing, rather than in relation to demographic data, or the irretrievable point of origin. Equally important is to conceive the London location as unfixed as the point of origin. Ien Ang concisely proposes: 'A critical diasporic cultural politics should privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but precisely keep a creative tension between "where you're from" and "where you're at"' (2001: 35). As all of these poets' life experience show, in the contemporary contextual circumstances of regular border-crossing, generally easier personal travel, and all forms of communications (from the telephone, to the media, to the software applications over the Internet), communities are consistently established across two or more cultural spaces. Thus Stuart Hall once stated: 'identity is an endless, ever un-finished conversation' (Akomfrah 2013). Accordingly, using London as methodology has allowed me to bypass essentialist questions of what exact elements make the Chinese culture, focusing instead on concrete implications of migration and stability in this literary production from the global metropolis. It has worked against the romance of diaspora-as-exile, demythologising and undercutting the abstract nostalgia of the diasporic imagination, and instead allowed me to be attentive to that synchronic 'creative tension'; to the ways in which that 'unfinished conversation' is *now*, at the moment of writing, rather than how it looked before, or speculating on what it will become after.

The critical implications of this investigation are multiple: it engages with the field of Chinese and sinophone literatures, suggesting that it is too limiting because it excludes those poetic works written in English; it engages with diaspora studies and its residual insistence on either nostalgia or 'homing', by showing that these poets approach identities and location in many other ways; finally it engages with world

literature and transnational literature, and with a recuperated multiculturalism, to emphasize the kind of social context (London) these poets relate to.

Culture does imply differences, but in order to improve our understanding and grasping of these differences, and gain access to concepts and discursive practices that are different from ours, we need to look at them not taxonomically, but as interactive and refractive, in a relational way. In fact, much of this exploration suggests that mobility and migration destabilize identities and communities precisely by detaching identity from place, and enabling the creation of cross-national 'relational' identities, in the continuous flux of global cities.

Among the contending issues over the legitimacy of this body of texts is the question of its literary value and its authenticity - the question of the canon. Since the Chinese-writing poets seem to enjoy a more established reputation in the world of Chinese literature, while the English-writing ones are more or less unknown by Cultural China, we could perhaps deduce that the 'value' is still attached to the authority of the Chinese language as repository of authenticity.

I would argue, however, that for the monolingual readers, reading these texts in translation or in the original necessarily puts them in the labyrinth of heteroglossia, a xenophony that challenges both the concept of English and Chinese as a unitary, linear, and continuous linguistic realm, while confronting and engaging with multicultural discourses. Indeed, in the surveyed writing experiences, the migration and diffusion of texts and cultures are affectively, materially and symbolically imbricated with race, gender, language and culture, developing multiple and multi-layered identities in the crossing or transgressing of borders in both physical and conceptual spaces.

Notes

1. Some interest has been developing on Chinese writers in the UK during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, among the most relevant studies of Chinese novelists who migrated to London, while continuing to pursue their literary career there are: Anne Witchard's *Lao She in London* (2012), Diana Yeh, *The Happy Hsiungs* (2014), and Patricia Laurence's *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes. Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* (2003). The latter documents the interactions between the two Chinese writers Ling Shuhua and Xiao Qian and the London Bloomsbury group. To the best of my knowledge, Gregory Lee's *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Trouble Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (1996) still remains the only monograph that touches upon the work of some Chinese-British poets in the UK. In a number of books I have also been able to find reference to the work of Indo-Caribbean writers Meiling Jin and Hannah Lowe, although this was mainly in relation with their gender and identity as feminists.
2. A famous example is given by the Manchu writer Shu Qingchun, better known as Lao She, who, in 1924, landed in the cultural capital of London, settling down for about 6 years, publishing his first novels while teaching at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London.
3. For a literature review on languaging, see Juffermans 2015.
4. *Sanwen* is a Chinese literary genre that can be defined as locating itself between poetry and the jotted essays.
5. For a discussion of Lowe's work, see also Goffe, 2013.
6. *White ghost* [original footnote]

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